When it comes to the Irish border, the government's reheated customs proposals are nothing less than magical thinking

> ‘Hopefully we won’t, in this part of the world, be the sacrificial lamb that will be traded away as part of a deal between the EU and the UK at the end of the day. There is that risk. And I understand the fine words that people have for us – you know, “we’ll protect the open border” and all the rest of it. But you wait until the final outcome until you know what the real story is.’

As with the referendum itself, the process of the UK’s withdrawal from the EU is characterised by indecision and conflict within the Conservative Party. The whole country, the whole continent indeed, has to wait on hold whilst internecine struggles of personality and ambition play themselves out.

But there is an anguish in the waiting and a sharpness to the uncertainty that is distinct in the border region in Ireland. As the focus group participant from the Fermanagh/Donegal border region explained, public promises mean little when they can be subject to tweaking, twisting and even outright trashing when they are put back on the British Cabinet table.

This is a region that is used to being peripheral to decision making in the halls of Westminster, Stormont, and Dáil Éireann. More particularly, it is used to bearing the brunt of spats between Dublin and London. Across centuries, indeed, European quarrels have left an imprint on Ulster. This is most apparent, of course, in the annual commemorations in which the colours of the union flag are intermingled with the Orange of the Dutch king of the seventeenth century Williamite wars.

Not yet a century ago, the most brutal demonstration of Britain and Ireland’s inability to peacefully manage their entanglements was the act of partition – a slash of state sovereignty across farmers’ fields, along narrow rivers, and between neighbours. This is a place where the straightforward nation-state model really did not fit – how could it, after such a complex history of mixing and bonding, exploitation and division?

At the very end of the second millennium, a way to manage this complexity was found. It is no coincidence that this came as both the UK and Ireland were part of the European Union – where integration between states was a deliberate act to increase prosperity and decrease propensity for war. The 1998 Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement was a remarkable achievement for diplomacy and trust-building, and a new chapter in the relationship of British and Irish.

And once again the Irish border region was the totem for the British-Irish relationship – but this time it reaped rewards. The watchtowers and checkpoints were dismantled, the roads

resurfaced and reconnected, small companies dipped their toes into the non-domestic market and flourished, graduates took new jobs on the other side of the border, patients found better treatment through shared specialised services. Proximity to the border transformed from burden to benefit – it was a door into a bigger room, opening up all sorts of possibilities.

It is these small companies, these workers, these families in the border region who are waiting most anxiously on the outcome of the Brexit negotiations. They have no MLAs sitting in Stormont and no MPs sitting in Westminster to represent them; there is no Executive to make decisions for them.

Local councillors and state agencies advise them to prepare for Brexit but what should they prepare for? The most obvious thing to do would be to turn their backs on the familiar suppliers, producers, customers on the other side of the border. They have been forced to do this before. It left an economic and social devastation that is still visible after decades. It also created a resilience. It fostered – through necessity – skills for entrepreneurship and ingenuity that would shame the most cocksure metropolitan.

More fundamentally, such history also created a deep wariness of British government and Irish government policy, a distrust honed by experience. The weariness is exacerbated by the knowledge that – as night follows day – a cackhanded implementation or a broken promise will be exploited and manipulated by those willing to use fear and insecurity to further their political aims. This is the kind of certainty that is filling the Brexit-related vacuum in the border region.

One unavoidable fact is that Brexit is a process involving two sides. A reasonable solution with minimal damage and even some advantages would require negotiation, compromise, accommodation. A negative, even devastating, outcome, however, is much easier to achieve. One side, it is not averse to trumpeting, could just walk away and hang the consequences – after all, Belleek and Ballyshannon are very, very far from Cambden and Westminster.

If the UK government ministers won't come to the border, then 'the border' must go to them. "It is something that perhaps we could make workable", commented Taoiseach Leo Varadkar when confronted again with the prospect of a reheated proposal for UK/EU customs partnership, his well-worn tone of exasperation dropping towards one of desperation.

But there are solid reasons why the customs partnership idea was rejected last August. Such reasons are evident in the border region: the daily 118k+ vehicle crossings, the 250 cross-border roads, the predominance of very small traders, the supply chains that criss-cross the border. Further reasons for its rejection are rooted in the functional necessities of customs law and practice. There is a need to know – for consumer safety, public revenue, national security – what is entering and what is exiting the country: the quality, quantity, standard, category of good. This does not happen without enormous consequences for border management and cross-border traders.

And maximum facilitation is no more than what its name suggests: it *facilitates* customs arrangements. If those arrangements are debilitating to business, that pill isn't sweetened by coming in e-form. It is not that technological means of facilitating trade across a customs border don't already exist. But they are risky, costly and slow to roll-out (take any ambitious government IT project for measure). They will also be quite pointless if they are not accompanied by the physical means of inspecting the goods, to check to see that what is crossing the border matches what was declared.

In sum, technology does not make a hard border soft. If there are tariffs, barriers to trade, rules of origin to implement these will have a negative effect on trade; this is regardless of whether all declarations are made online rather than on paper, or whether all vehicles pass by cameras rather than persons as they go down an approved road to the other side of the border.

Essentially, the UK's proposals for managing the Irish border as a customs border centre on the conceit that a hard Brexit can mean a soft border, if border controls can be made as unnoticeable as possible. In a place, on an island, where modern history, politics, identity and culture is deeply defined by the border, this is one bit of magical thinking too far.

Both the UK and the EU agreed early on that flexibility would be required when it came to the post-Brexit future of the Irish border. What has stymied the imagination and stayed the hand of British negotiators but a working definition of national interest and sovereignty that simply has no room for the complex realities of Northern Ireland? With little indication of adapting anything other than platitudes towards the Irish border, all talk of the territorial and economic integrity of the United Kingdom can only ring hollow.